



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

THE IMMORTALS AND MR. POWYS¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

As soon as we encountered Mr. John Cowper Powys's *One Hundred Best Books, With a Commentary and An Essay on Books and Reading*, we proceeded to follow the habit of Emerson (or was it Lamb or Hazlitt?—we have looked it up repeatedly, but we always forget). That is to say, coming upon a new book, we turned away and read an old one; but in this case, the old one was also by Mr. John Cowper Powys. It was his share of a volume called *Confessions of Two Brothers*, and our hope was that we should find there some information as to the equipment of this adventurous and greatly-daring author. We found what we had hoped to find: a light that flooded the secret chambers of Mr. Powys's soul, disclosing the ways of his mind and the nature of his taste.

We had known that Mr. Powys was *arbiter elegantiarum* to those dear ladies, avid of aesthetic fertilization, aflame with spiritual passion, who compose the audiences at lecture-courses in those fountains of American culture, our women's clubs and our church "parlors." We knew that Mr. Powys was one of the best beloved of the interpreters and priests of beauty who are privileged to minister unto those ardent and eager souls; that he was a lecturer prized and quoted, wearing with grace and majesty, we doubted not, the splendid mantle of intellectual authority. We knew that he had published critical essays in which the *Kansas City Star* found "a semblance of the Grand Style." Also, we knew, he had published a novel which moved the *Philadelphia Record* to exclaim of it that "every page is a joy," and caused the *Press* of that incomparable city to note that "Mr.

¹ *One Hundred Best Books*, by John Cowper Powys. New York: G. Arnold Shaw, 1916.

Powys's style is the style of Thomas Hardy"—we paid small attention to the characteristically cloistered observation of the *Nation* that it was "a book of distinctive flavor," detecting in that unhandsomely reticent estimate a soul inimical to sweetness or to light. We knew, finally, that Mr. Powys was famous, was International. Nevertheless, we felt it our duty to explore the *Confessions*, in order that we might be prepared to approach *One Hundred Best Books* with some preliminary knowledge, authoritatively derived, as to the qualities of mind and heart which the author must have brought to the conduct of his high and consecrated task.

The first thing we learned (and we beg the reader not to object, in haste, that the point is irrelevant)—the first thing we learned was communicated to us in this passage, on the opening page of the *Confessions*: "It came over me yesterday that the whole secret of my being, of my happiness and my misery, was to be discovered in my *hands*." It seems that when Mr. Powys is quiescent, or engaged in quotidian pursuits (eating or bathing or tying a shoe-string or posting a letter) his hands are dead hands—clumsy, helpless, inert: "They are out of reach of the electricity of my being. My consciousness does not penetrate to where they hang." But when Mr. Powys is lecturing, a miracle occurs: "My hands change completely and my consciousness flows through them to the tips of my fingers. . . . I feel them as I speak; and between them and the waves of my thought there is a direct magnetic connection. Under ordinary conditions my hands are the hands of a dead body. When I am lecturing, they are the hands of a lover; of a lover caressing his darling." Fascinating as this is, we were still unsatisfied; but the *Confessions* led us further: they took us from those inspired and amorous hands inward, upward, and downward. We found, according to Mr. Powys, that his exterior appearance "gives an impression of power and formidableness that is altogether misleading": for beneath his "Roman Despot look" he conceals a shrinking timidity, "the soul of a slave." Traveling still further inward, we ascertained that Mr. Powys is dowered with a mind that is "singularly clear, fluid, and nimble"; yet we learned, with a brief sigh for the inescapable carnality of our kind, that, for Mr. Powys, the earth-breath is dangerously seductive: "I live," he tells us, "a double life. I live in my mind, which is eternally restless, mobile, and light as air;

and in my sensations, which are heavily-weighted, earth-bound . . .” As to his creed: “I believe everything and—nothing; and I pass from sensation to sensation like a moth from bush to bush.” In his tastes, Mr. Powys prefers blue to yellow, satin to velvet, horse-hair sofas to cushioned couches.”

Concerning his quality as a critic, we were cheered to find that for once the encomium on the publisher’s wrapper is correct. Mr. Powys, says the wrapper, “is without a peer in his particular field: that of telling rapt audiences the adventures of his soul among masterpieces”; and this is corroborated by the candid admission of Mr. Powys himself: for he tells us in the *Confessions* that he is “an eloquently impassioned critic” (“not even my enemies could deny my right to that title,” says he). Indeed, he is prepared to rate himself as “the very acme and apogee of a born critic” (“I do not regard it as an outrageous claim,” he observes). Gifted with an “abnormal and insatiable receptivity, a sort of sensual voluptuousness in the intellectual world,” it is easy to understand by what path he has climbed to his apogee. Finally,—and we shall do well to remember the caution,—Mr. Powys utters this warning: “I am much cleverer than my enemies suppose”; though how so genial and confiding a soul as Mr. Powys could have incurred any enemies we find it impossible to perceive.

You now have, perhaps, an outline of Mr. Powys,—from the mystical sentience of his hands and the duality of his inner life and the shape and texture of his mind, to his taste in sofas and his affinity with the moth. And so we come to the *Hundred Best Books*.

Clearly it was rare sport for Mr. Powys to compile this scrupulously heterodox catalogue. In selecting his list he was actuated, he tells us, by “shameless subjectivity”; and he realized that his choice of books would be “a challenge to the intelligence perusing it.” The claims of venerated reputations have not annoyed him. He glories in the “essential right of personal choice”; and “the great still images from the dusty museum of standard authors” can go hang for all he cares. So it would never do to demand of him indignantly why he omits George Eliot and includes Mr. Gilbert Cannan; for that would be merely playing into his hands: that is precisely what he wants you to do. He rejoices in his contempt for the “well-read” philistine, the worshiper

of orthodox excellence. He is the tameless urchin of criticism, and he makes his outrageous racket with his stick on your front fence in order that you may be teased to come out and swear at him.

You find a list which begins soberly enough (it is, no doubt, intended as a decoy) with the Psalms of David, the *Odyssey*, The *Bacchæ* of Euripides, Horace, Catullus, the *Divine Comedy*, Rabelais, *Candide*, Shakespeare (with *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Timon of Athens* preferred for spécial mention), Milton, Sir Thomas Browne, Cervantes, Goethe, Emerson: you find this list, which starts off with such sweet and classic reasonableness, abruptly presenting you with Sudermann and his *Song of Songs*, Hauptmann and *The Fool in Christ*, Ibsen's *Wild Duck*, Mr. Edgar Lee Masters and his *Spoon River Anthology*, and—Mr. Oliver Onions: whereby you know that Mr. Powys is off at last, clattering happily with his ribald stick along your decorous palings.

Thereafter, the fun progresses according to Mr. Powys's uncompromising schedule. Artzibasheff with his *Samine* is yoked with Lamb and his *Elia*; Mr. George Bernard Shaw, costumed as John Tanner, flees in panic from Jane Austen; Mr. Chesterton, spouting conciliatory paradoxes, walks arm-in-arm with Emily Brontë. Ruthlessly Mr. Powys assembles them. You do not know whether to ponder more over those who have been invited to the party or over those who have been ignored. Here is Oscar Wilde; but where is Plato? You are delighted to welcome *Alice in Wonderland*; but where is Maeterlinck? Mr. W. Somerset Maugham is here, and so is Mr. Vincent O'Sullivan; Mr. Arnold Bennett chats amicably with his rival trilogist, Mr. Onions; and Anton Tchekov broods gently by himself, perhaps wondering why Tolstoi was omitted from the list of guests—a slight which he must bear in common with the authors of the Book of Job, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the New Testament, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Chaucer, Webster, Marlowe, Fielding, Flaubert, Hawthorne, Defoe, the *Upanishads*, the *Arabian Nights*, and a host of other disconsolate immortals and abandoned masterworks.

We like Mr. Powys. We like his *gamineries*, his charming assurance, his cosy confidences, his exuberant atrocities. He is indeed, as he says, an acme and an apogee.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.